

THE YEAR'S ARCHITECTURE.

A survey of the results of endeavor in any field of art in a single year must necessarily be partial and imperfect, for one year is so linked with its forerunners and followers that it cannot be accurately gauged apart from them. This is especially the case when that single year is the current year. Still in the midst of its activities, we are too near to grasp it as a whole, or to see it adequately in its relation to what has gone before, while we know not yet what may come after, so that our interpretations of the significance of its performance are but guesses.

But in any exhibition of current work it is inevitable that more than the present year will be represented. Although the intention may have been to illustrate the work of the moment, it will be found, especially in an exhibition of architecture, that many of the buildings shown were commenced or even completed more than a year ago,—in some instances perhaps several years ago; while many of the drawings show buildings not yet begun. Indeed, the chief value of an architectural exhibition (and its value is mainly to the profession itself and to those few who are interested in watching its development) is to be found in this bringing together of the immediate past and the immediate future, this gathering of representative examples of the scattered results of our work into one place, thus permitting us in some measure to get our bearings, to find out where we are, and to study the tendencies that seem to manifest themselves. It is an opportunity to examine one's own work and the work of one's own locality in comparison with that of others, to take account of failures and shortcomings, to note improvement, to win encouragement and stimulus for new endeavor.

In this view the lesser works are quite as important as the larger. Indeed, the constant succession of smaller buildings, which form the principal part of architectural practice, is apt to be more significant of tendencies than the larger and exceptional undertakings. As the past year has not been prolific in great enterprises, the moment seems propitious for taking

note of such tendencies as seem to show themselves in the average run of work,—in the dwelling-houses, large and small, in city and country, in the apartment houses, the schools, the churches, and the business blocks, omitting for the nonce the monster sky-scraper from our view, if it be possible to escape the aggressive thing.

The great improvement in the designs of our average architecture can hardly fail to have been noted by every observer of the recent rapid growth of the suburbs of our large cities. Vulgar and unsatisfactory much of it still is, we must confess. Such a simple and perfectly obvious rule as that the face of a lintel must not be set beyond the face of its support, we find constantly disregarded. But the very buildings, in which this and other such vulgar transgressions of elementary laws of design occur, are often in other respects not without merit. They are frequently simple and agreeable in mass, and seldom offend greatly against the law which requires that architectural form shall be the natural and direct outcome of structural requirement. The work for the most part of cheap contractors or of the uneducated architects whom such contractors employ, they show evidence of being founded on better models of design than was the case with such buildings a very few years ago. There is greater simplicity, there is less of tawdry and vulgar ornament: there is more regard for architectural propriety. The sham gable, the red pressed brick, the mock-Romanesque doorway and other such vulgarities are much less frequent in the work of the past year or two. The undeniable improvement in this substratum of architectural work, the "vernacular," as it was once the fashion to call it, is perhaps an even more encouraging sign of the times than the improvement in the work of the trained practitioner. It is perhaps worth noting that the ignorant "vernacular" of twenty years ago, which some oversanguine critics of those days flattered themselves was to produce from its chaos new and worthy forms of art, has improved, not by developing within itself (how could such inorganic monstrosity develop?), but by approximating more and more to the improving work of trained architects. When public taste has so far developed that all our architectural work is, as a

matter of course, put into the hands of architects of thorough training, then indeed may we look for real and permanent advance. The improvement we have noted is not confined to any one of our larger cities, but is found to greater or less extent in all,—in St. Louis, in Chicago, in St. Paul, as in Philadelphia, New York, and Boston. But the country towns, in New England no less than in the West, are for the most part still in the very dark ages; and architectural vulgarity, as bad as anything in the sixties, is the rule there, as it is gradually becoming the exception in the larger cities.

Another observation, which has forced itself upon our attention during the last two or three years, is the marked growth of distinctive local character in the architecture of our principal cities. This also may be regarded as decidedly a hopeful sign,—a sign of wholesome and natural life and vigor. Chicago, New York, Boston, and Philadelphia, while all have improved, differ from each other in their architecture in a way they did not a few years ago. In the midst of much work which is less distinctive, in spite of character more or less common to all,—although much of the domestic work of Chicago, for instance, shows the influence of Boston, and architects of one city often work in another,—yet, speaking broadly, a local character is nevertheless recognizable. In New York the influence of the *École des Beaux Arts* is paramount in much of the work, often even to the sacrifice, if not of local, of national character, so that many of the buildings look as if they had strayed from the boulevards of Paris. Though we may regret this wholesale importation, this direct imitation, with all its mannerisms, of a style which is full of bad taste and solecism, in spite of the strength in plan and mass of its originators, it does seem to express New York; and it certainly has been acclimatized there, and is affecting nearly all the work, while it has received but little welcome in other parts of the country, so that this direct Parisian influence has come to be peculiarly characteristic of New York, and may possibly be the starting-point of a local manner of building. Lavish display, richness of effect, characterize most of the work and express the luxury-loving New Yorker. In the quieter work of Boston the precedents of the Italian

Renaissance and of our own Colonial or Georgian work lie at the foundation of most recent design. These two influences often mingle, and are not seldom handled with a freedom and, in spite of many sins, with a regard for principle and law rather than for mere precedent, which is promising, and has already resulted in work which is the natural and orderly expression of local and present conditions. The recent revival of Georgian work in England and the renewed study of the work of Wren, Hawksmoor, and Gibbs has not been without its influence; while a good deal of the ecclesiastical work in and about Boston shows a loving study of the mediæval parish churches of England and the influence of modern English church work, such as is found, perhaps, to the same extent, nowhere else in the United States.

In Philadelphia, which formerly was a byword in the architectural world (and the architects who made it so are still some of them extant), there has appeared a group of men, of whom Messrs. Wilson Eyre, Frank Miles Day & Brother, and Messrs. Cope & Stewardson are the most prominent, whose work shows an originality, a delicacy of feeling, and a scholarly quality, which is, to say the least, not surpassed in America, and which is perhaps even more distinctive than the work in Boston or New York. Much as the work of the individuals in this group differs, it still has a similarity of quality, showing the mutual influence of these men upon each other.

As we said at the outset, architectural quality, always hard to define, is particularly so when we are in the midst of it; and as we write we are conscious of the many exceptions to what we have suggested. Perhaps, after all, the exceptions are the rule.

But every candid person will admit, when comparing the work done now with that even of ten years ago, that the art of architecture in America has made great strides, and if one may venture to read the signs it is still going forward.

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